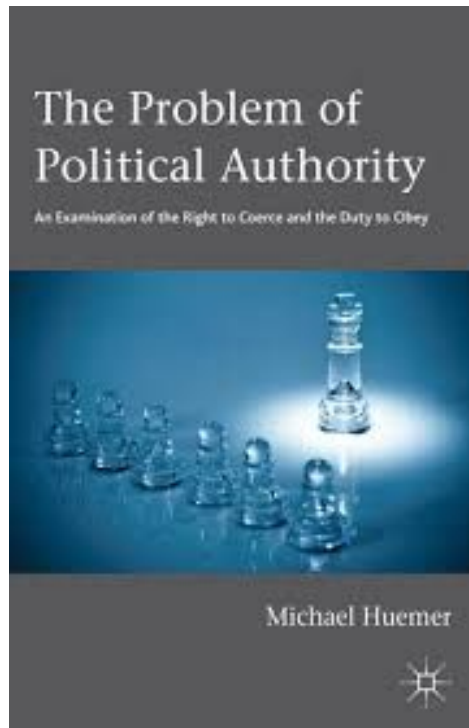


The Problem of Political Authority - Examining the Right to Coerce and the Duty to Obey by Michael Huemer



Overview

Libertarianism. Varieties:

- a. Minimal state libertarianism
- b. Anarcho-capitalism

Three ways of defending liberty

- a. Economic
- b. Rights-based
- c. Common sense

Approach (c) is the best.



Economic Defenses of Liberty

The need for moral arguments

- Most people do not think like economists.
- People will not accept a social system that violates their moral sense.



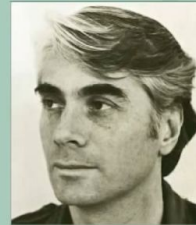
Rights-Based Arguments

The Argument from Non-Aggression

1. Individuals have rights against aggression.
2. Policy X commits aggression.
3. Therefore, X is wrong.

Example

1. Drug prohibition coerces drug users.
2. Drug users haven't coerced others.
3. So drug prohibition = aggression.
4. So drug prohibition is wrong.



Problems for the Rights Approach

Rights can be overridden.

The cabin in the woods example:

You are lost in the woods and in danger of starvation. You find an unoccupied cabin. Can you break in and take some of the owner's food?



Problems for the Rights Approach

Rights can be overridden.

The car borrowing example:

An injured person needs to be rushed to the hospital. The only available transportation is someone else's car. Can you break in and use the car?



Problems for the Rights Approach

Rights can be overridden.

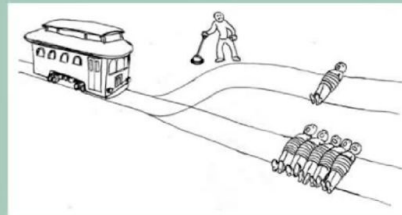
Some compare these to government social welfare programs.



Problems for the Rights Approach

The trolley problem

- A runaway trolley is going to hit and kill five people. You can switch the trolley to another track, where it will hit only one person. Should you switch it?
- Most people say “yes”.
- The rights approach does not explain this.

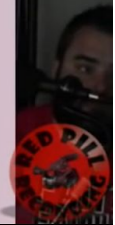


Common Sense Argument

Observation: Government engages in prima facie wrongful activities. Ex.:

- Taxation
- War
- Drug prohibition

Why do we accept these things?

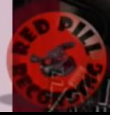


Common Sense Argument

Political Authority

- The entitlement of the state to rule + obligation of citizens to obey.
- This idea ascribes a *special moral status* to the state.

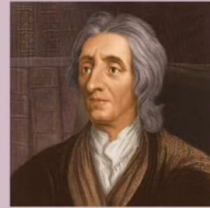
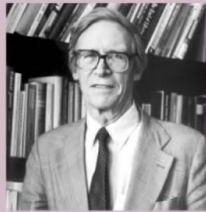
Q: What accounts for this authority?



Common Sense Argument

Some theories of authority

- Traditional social contract
- Hypothetical contract
- Democratic authority
- Consequentialism



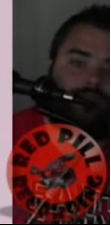
Theories of Authority

The Social Contract

- Government agrees to provide law & protection
- Citizens agree to obey

How did we agree?

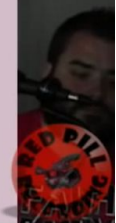
- Agreement through presence
- Agreement through acceptance of benefits



Theories of Authority

Agreement through Presence: Problems

- One may set conditions on use of one's property.
- One may not set conditions on the use of others' property.
- Does the state own all land?
 - Perhaps the state passes a law saying that it owns all land.
 - This presupposes political authority.



Theories of Authority

Social Contract: General problems

- Refusal to recognize explicit dissent
- Lack of mutual obligation



Theories of Authority

The Authority of Democracy

- Laws are authorized by the people
- Democracy implements equality
- Obligation to respect other citizens' judgments



Theories of Authority

Problems with Democratic Theories

- Majority will does not justify coercion.
- Procedural equality does not override individual rights.
- Need to respect others' judgments does not negate individual rights.



Common Sense Libertarianism

Epistemic superiority of the common sense approach

- Almost all philosophical theories are false.
- Human knowledge proceeds *from* the concrete and particular *to* the abstract and general.



Common Sense Libertarianism

Epistemic superiority of the common sense approach

- Almost all philosophical theories are false.
- Human knowledge proceeds *from* the concrete and particular *to* the abstract and general.
- The stronger the premises, the greater the risk of error.



Anarchy or Minimal State?

Libertarianism can be defended by common sense morality.

The defense of anarchism is more complex.

- Common sense morality is non-absolutist.
- Complex, partly empirical arguments are needed to assess consequences of anarchy.



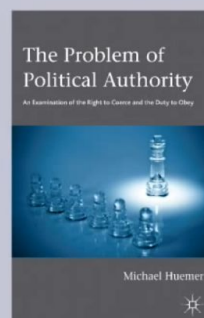
Overview

Background: Two theses

- No state has (legitimate) authority.
- Best social system is anarcho-capitalism.

Two challenges:

- Most people accept authority. Is this evidence that authority is real?
- Is it dangerous to undermine belief in authority?

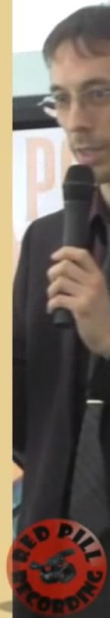


Social Proof

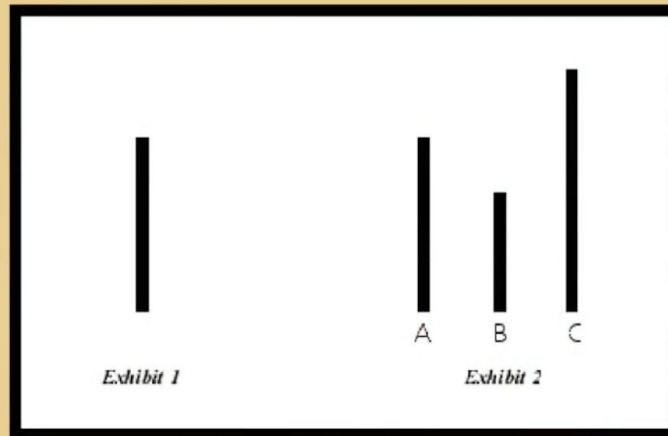
The tendency to believe what others believe.

Illustrations:

- Culture
- The Asch Experiment



Social Proof



Status Quo Bias

The bias in favor of the current practices of one's own society.



Cognitive Dissonance

People tend to adopt rationalizations to maintain pre-existing attitudes, esp. a positive self-image.



Cognitive Dissonance

Unflattering explanations for obedience:

- Fear of punishment
- Conformism
- Instinctive deference to the powerful

Flattering explanations:

- Conscientiousness, duty to obey, social spirit.

Cognitive Dissonance

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Political Aesthetics

Government appeals to emotional/aesthetic reactions.



Political Aesthetics

Uniforms



Political Aesthetics

Rituals



Political Aesthetics

Architecture



Political Aesthetics

Authoritative language

- Legalese: “I am herewith returning the stipulation to dismiss in the above entitled matter; the same being duly executed by me.”

Political Aesthetics

Effects:

- Conveys an impression of sophistication & intelligence.
- Difficult to challenge an idea that one cannot understand.
- Drains emotional impact.
 - Encourages more orderly attitudes in citizens.
 - Makes coercion easier for coercers.

Political Aesthetics

Authoritative language

- An actual law:

If two or more members of the same family acquire interests in any property described in paragraph (1) in the same transaction (or a series of related transactions), the person (or persons) acquiring the term interests in such property shall be treated as having acquired the entire property and then transferred to the other persons the interests acquired by such other persons in the transaction (or series of transactions). Such transfer shall be treated as made in exchange for the consideration (if any) provided by such other persons for the acquisition of their interests in such property.

(26 USC §2702)



Political Aesthetics

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Stockholm Syndrome

Stockholm bank robbery, 1973.



Stockholm Syndrome

Patty Hearst, ca. 1974



Stockholm Syndrome

Why does it occur?

- Hypothesis: Adaptation designed to please those in power.
- Further hypothesis: This mechanism affects attitudes toward the state.

The Stanford Prison Experiment



Images from the
Stanford experiment

(with thanks to Philip Zimbardo)



My Lai



My Lai

Lt. William Calley, 1971



My Lai

Observations

- Evil is committed by democratic governments too.
- Most will obey wrongful orders.
- Those who do not participate will do nothing to stop abuses.
- The government will try to cover it up.
- Wrongdoers will be unpunished or minimally punished.



Conclusions

Human beings have pro-authority bias.
→ Pro-authority intuitions are unreliable.

Belief in authority is dangerous.

- Authority figures are prone to abuse of power.
- Subjects are prone to blind obedience.
- Government cannot be trusted to police itself.



Further Reading

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*

Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*

